



TOWN OF NEW MILFORD

2 Pickett District Road

New Milford, Connecticut 06776

(860) 210-2030 • Fax (860) 210-2016

Office of the Youth Agency

February 28, 2023

Dear Sen. Osten, Rep. Walker, Senator Berthel, Rep. Nuccio, Sen. Lesser, Rep. Gilcrest, Sen. Somers, Rep. Bolinsky and Members of the Human Services Subcommittee:

My name is Jason O'Connor and I am the Director of New Milford Youth Agency, New Milford's Youth Service Bureau. Thank you for your time today to hear my testimony on the Governor's Budget proposal. I would like to thank the Governor for keeping Youth Service Bureaus whole in his proposed budget. It is very much appreciated, however, the extraordinary needs of our youth have elevated the need for additional staffing and resources to support the complex nature of the issues facing them and their families. As such, additional yearly funding of \$60,000 per YSB (\$6.18 million for all 103 YSBs) is vital and will allow for increased staffing and support in the areas of mental health, case management and/or program services (based on the needs of each community) to increase capacity and respond to issues the current funding allocation does not allow.

Here at the New Milford Youth Agency, we have expanded our services to offer no-cost clinical counseling for adolescent youth and their families. This expansion was needed after seeing the emergent need to offer clinical counseling services here in our community, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns regarding youth mental health are not new, as the CDC (2022) reported last week that more than half of our teenage girls feel persistent sadness or hopelessness (57% in 2021 vs 36% in 2011) and 30% said they have seriously considered suicide (up from 19%). Additionally, more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year (CDC, 2022). These national trends echo our local community, as last school year here in New Milford 30% of our 12th graders reported being depressed and only 30% of students felt they had personal power and control over their lives (Search Institute, 2022).

These statistics are not going away and are not going to get any better unless there is additional funding and support for our Connecticut youth and their mental and behavioral health. Prior to the pandemic, nearly 1 in 5 children had a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder e.g. anxiety, depression, ADHD, disruptive behavior disorder, etc., however, of those children, only 20% of them received care from a specialized mental health care provider (CDC, 2021). I share these statistics with you to help show the demand and need for additional mental health provision and prevention-based services for our youth. Additional State funding would provide real and concrete services to aid our youth through the provision of additional mental health services. YSB's are a viable source for these services as our agencies have active relationships with our local schools, maintain an active pulse on youth opinion and behavior, and are extremely invested within our community. This funding would be life-changing for our YSB and many in our region, as we could expand our services to provide relevant and contemporary programs to help increase our youth and their family's safety and well-being.

In closing, YSB's are essential for the well-being of our communities. YSB's actively review, assess, and offer services that are respective of their community's needs. Our staff are dedicated and work brilliantly in our craft both locally and regionally. I thank you for your time and consideration and all that you do every day to help support our youth and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jason O'Connor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jason" and last name "O'Connor" clearly legible.

Jason O'Connor, LMSW
Executive Director
New Milford Youth Agency
joconnor@newmilford.org
Office: (860) 210-2030
Cell: (860) 488-0055